333 NORTH MICHIGAN BUILDING

333 NORTH MICHIGAN AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
June, 1986

333 NORTH MICHIGAN BUILDING
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Architect: Holabird and Roche/Holabird and Root

Date of Construction: 1928

Dramatically sited where Michigan Avenue crosses the Chicago River are four buildings that collectively illustrate the profound stylistic changes that occurred in American architecture during the decade of the 1920s. The two that were built first, the Wrigley Building in 1921 and the Stone Container (originally London Guarantee and Accident Company) Building in 1924 exemplify the prevailing Beaux-Arts classicism of the early years of the decade. The third building, the Tribune Tower of 1928, typifies twentieth-century Gothicism. The last to be built, 333 North Michigan Avenue, was completed in 1928 in what was then considered an aggressively modern style that has come to be called Art Deco. This style would characterize American skyscraper design during the years between the First World War and the Great Depression.

The Art Deco Style

Although examples of Art Deco can be seen along almost every Main Street in America, its greatest concentration and most extravagant expression is to be found in the great twentieth-century skyscraper cities such as New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Miami. It was essentially an urban and cosmopolitan style and, as architectural historian Cervin Robinson states, "was intended to be both accessible to the general public and comprehensible to it." Hence its most noticeable patrons were the large business corporations and financial institutions, the communications and automobile industries, the luxury hotels, the elegant department stores, and the grand movie palaces. Art Deco reflected the optimistic and buoyant American spirit of the 1920s and as a style it embraced and celebrated the energy of industry and advances of science. Its forms were deliberately inspired by the machine, sleek and streamlined. Its orna-

ment was lavish and opulent, lush and colorful. It used manufacturing technology and new materials such as plywood, plastics, stainless steel, and chrome. It was a style that purported to be modern and contemporary and the rhetoric of the times hailed it as such.

Art Deco was international and, in fact, its name derives from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925. It was self-consciously modernistic. However, Art Deco was compounded of many strands, with roots in the past both here and abroad. In Europe, strong contributions came from the Art Nouveau, as exemplified by the Glasgow (Scotland) school and the work of Charles Rennie McIntosh, and the Viennese Secession style promulgated by the Wiener Werkstatte founded in 1903 by Josef Hoffman. Another factor was the colorism of the German Expressionist movement. In America, Frank Lloyd Wright's development of an abstract, geometric ornament was also influential. In addition, inspiration was drawn from Aztec and Egyptian Art.

The Art Deco skyscraper overall was not a radical departure from its Beaux-Arts predecessor and, in fact, depended first of all on the nineteenth-century American commercial style as developed by the Chicago school of architecture. Of significant impact was the formula for a tall building worked out by Louis Sullivan. Architectural historian Cervin Robinson explains:

> Sullivan's use of a luxurious but tightly organized ornament within a generally classicizing massing of form can be seen as a prototype for comparable Art Deco features. His emphatic use of vertical piers with recessed spandrels is another element common in Art Deco skyscrapers. Further, Sullivan's accent on building entrance and building top by means of dynamic ornament becomes general practice in most Art Deco skyscrapers.

Surprisingly, the distinctive appearance of the Art Deco skyscraper came not from the artistic world but the legal community. The New York zoning law of 1916 required that buildings occupy a decreasing percentage of their site area as their height increased. This resulted in a series of setbacks, determined by the width of the street, and allowed a tower of unlimited height on part of the site. Stepped-back massing became a distinctive feature of Art Deco skyscrapers. These buildings are marked by a pronounced verticality created by piers that rise unbroken to the roof line separating vertical banks of windows. The piers are typically devoid of ornament while the spandrels, which are recessed slightly, are often clad in material of contrasting color or texture. The setbacks, which cause the building to become narrower as it rises higher, reinforce the verticality.

Wall planes are extremely flat, and smooth materials such as limestone, polished granite, and marble are used for facing. Polychromatic effects are sometimes achieved by the application of various materials, such as faience and gold leaf. Ornament is always in very low relief and is generally non-historical and rectilinear. Common decorative

motifs are chevrons, zigzags, fluting, and reeding.

Art Deco was short-lived as the prosperity of the 1920s gave way to the Depression of the 1930s and major building construction was brought to a halt. It has only been in recent years that Art Deco has begun to receive the appreciation of architectural historians and attention of preservationists. Architectural historian Cervin Robinson explains why in his 1975 book, *Skyscraper Style-Art Deco in New York:*

> Seen in the light of the purist ethic of the Modern Movement, their gaudy effloresence of color and ornament look gauche. But in America of the late twenties and thirties Art Deco was the overwhelmingly prevailing modernism. The European International Style that had developed by the late thirties was not widely applied in America. Today, when we have had twenty years of the austere architecture ushered in by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Lever House, it may be refreshing to re-examine an architecture that aims to be popular, entertaining, and urbane.

Development of North Michigan Avenue

The decade of the 1920s was a period of significant growth for the city of Chicago. The accomplishments of these years are demonstrably apparent today. Particularly laudable was the implementation of parts of Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett's 1909 *Plan of Chicago*, a widely influential document of city planning which visualized a number of monumental improvements throughout the city. The rapid growth of urban America during the nineteenth century had created cities that were crowded, congested, and frequently chaotic. Towards the end of the century, social concerns and aesthetic considerations prompted a movement to bring order to America's cities. In Chicago, the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 demonstrated how a handsomely ordered environment could be created on a large scale. The "White City," as the fair grounds were popularly called, provided impetus and support for urban planning in the United States, and the "City Beautiful" movement had begun. One of the major forces in this movement was Chicagoan Daniel Burnham, and in 1906 Burnham undertook to develop a plan for Chicago. Sweeping changes were advocated which included the transformation of the lakefront into a premier recreational area; the development of the city's parks into an expanded and unified park system; the creation of cultural and civic centers in the central area; the construction of a network of highways linking Chicago with the suburbs; and the consolidation of the city's rail terminals. The Plan treated Michigan Avenue as one of the major north-south axes, the one "destined to carry the heaviest movement of any street in the world."

The Chicago Plan called for widening Michigan Avenue between Randolph Street and Chicago Avenue and for raising it between Randolph and Grand Avenue to create a lower level that would accommodate commercial traffic. At the river, a double-decked bridge, the upper level for pedestrian and light vehicle traffic and the lower for heavy

commercial traffic, was proposed to replace the outdated and overcrowded Rush Street Bridge which was then the primary river crossing. In 1909, the Chicago Plan Commission was established to promote the adoption and implementation of the Burnham Plan; one of its earliest projects was to persuade the city to undertake the improvement of Michigan Avenue. Work began on the street in 1916 and the construction of the bridge was started in 1918. It was opened with great fanfare on May 14, 1920 and, as historian Carl Condit relates in *Chicago 1910-29: Building, Planning and Urban Technology:*

> The effect was immediate and striking, and in less than a decade the extension of Michigan Avenue northward to its termination at Oak Street was to be totally transformed into a new kind of urban boulevard.

Until then, the street north of the bridge had been called Pine Street from the river to Ohio Street and Lincoln Parkway from Ohio to Oak Street. With the opening of the bridge, the name was changed and Michigan Avenue became the continuous boulevard linking the North and South sides that had been envisioned in the Chicago Plan.

Holabird and Roche/Holabird and Root

At the time of the building of 333 North Michigan Avenue, the architectural firm of Holabird and Roche had been in existence for almost half a century and unquestionably outranked other Chicago firms in senority and, possibly, prestige. However, neither William Holabird nor Martin Roche were native Chicagoans. Holabird, born in New York state in 1854 and educated at West Point, came to Chicago in 1875. Roche was born in Ohio in 1855 and came to Chicago in his youth. Both men had been trained in the office of William LeBaron Jenney, one of the pioneers of skeletal construction. In 1880, Holabird formed his own firm with Ossian C. Simonds and in 1881 they were joined by Roche. In 1883, Simonds left to specialize in landscape architecture and the firm of Holabird and Roche was founded. By the beginning of the 1920s, Holabird and Roche was one of the largest firms in the country and was nationally known for its office buildings, court houses, and large hotels. Holabird and Roche had consistently demonstrated technical competence and aesthetic mastery in designing the large urban office block, and their work, as part of the first generation of what some architectural historians refer to as the Chicago school, has been extensively studied and admired. In Chicago, the Marquette Building of 1893 (designated a Chicago Landmark on June 9, 1975) is considered by many to be their most notable achievement.

When Holabird died in 1923 and after the death of Martin Roche in 1927, control of the firm passed to Holabird's son, John A., who was joined by John W. Root, himself heir to a major architectural talent as the son of Daniel Burnham's partner. The partnership became Holabird and Root. John Holabird and John Root, respectively graduates of West Point and Cornell, met while both were studying in Paris at the Ecole

des Beaux-Arts. While being thoroughly grounded in a basic and traditional education in architecture, they were, at the same time, being exposed to the excitement and innovations happening in the art world in early twentieth-century Europe. The dual benefits of this experience would later inform their work of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Meticulously engineered, their buildings of this period also exhibit a finely honed feeling for all the expressive capabilities of the Art Deco style. This second generation of architects almost immediately engaged in a particularly fruitful and creative period of designing such masterpieces of the set-back skyscraper as 333 North Michigan, the Daily News Building (now Riverside Plaza), the Palmolive Building, the Chicago Board of Trade Building (designated a Chicago Landmark on May 4, 1977) and the Rand Building (now Dain Tower) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Cosmopolitan and urbane, the two new partners also actively encouraged the studio and decorative arts and thus were responsible for the very fine Art Deco ornamentation in the public spaces of their buildings. Although demolished in 1973, the Diana Court lobby of the Michigan Square Building at 540 North Michigan Avenue was considered a premier example. Both the men contributed to the planning and design of the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. The ultimate triumph of Holabird and Root came in 1930 when they were awarded a gold medal by the Architectural League of New York "for the great distinction and high architectural quality which they have achieved in the solution of the American office building." In 1980, the Chicago Historical Society mounted a major retrospective of the work of the Holabird and Roche/Holabird and Root. In appraising their work, architectural historian and curator of the exhibit, Robert Bruegmann, writing in the Fall, 1980, issue of *Chicago History*, noted:

> The present show of Holabird and Roche buildings confirms what almost every commentator since the late nineteenth century has stated: in the quantity and quality of its production this has been one of the most consistent architectural firms in the country...It also seems clear that the brilliant work produced by the firm in the late 1920s and early 1930s deserves fuller recognition as one of the great achievements of American architecture.

The building at 333 North Michigan Avenue is a thin, slab-like structure whose long demsion extends along Michigan Avenue. On June 25, 1927, *The Economist* devoted a lengthy column to the new building and especially noted one of its most outstanding features:

> The 333 North Michigan building, for which plans were prepared by Holabird & Roche, will occupy one of the most conspicuous sites in Michigan Avenue. Looking from the north it will appear to be directly in the center of this thoroughfare, because of the jog in the boulevard at this point, and will present the same relative view as does the Wrigley building from the south. Being directly opposite Wacker drive, it will also dominate the view from this thoroughfare.

To take maximum advantage of the site and to accommodate Chicago's 1923 zoning law, which was similar to the 1916 New York law, the northern end of the building is treated as a tower that rises thirty-five stories while the southern end is a thin slab that rises twenty-four stories. The zoning laws of the 1920s stipulated that occupied towers could rise above previous height limits as long as they stayed within an imaginery line slanting back from the maximum street wall height. Conformance with this ordinance engendered what is now referred to as the set-back skyscraper. Holabird and Roche were pioneers in creatively working with this design theme and 333 was the firm's first attempt within this architectural context. The design, as John Root readily acknowledged, had been heavily influenced by Saarinen's second place *Chicago Tribune* competition entry of 1923 which had successfully solved the problem of how to unify the discrete blocks which the set-back form produced. This was done by making a number of small set-backs and unifying them by continuous deep channels of windows between the wall surfaces. The eye follows the vertical lines straight up with no horizontal stops.

The four-story base of the structure is sheathed in polished Oriental Granite from Rockville, Minnesota, in varigated shades of black, purple, mauve, gray, and pink. Above this the building is clad in buff-colored Bedford, Indiana, limestone in a shot-sawn finish with spandrel panels of dark terra cotta. A freize, sharply incised in low relief at the fifth floor, symbolizes the growth and history of Chicago.

As was customary in Art Deco commerical buildings, the interior public spaces were particularly resplendent in texture and material as this description from the February, 1929 *Architectural Record* illustrates:

> In the entrance and elevator lobbies are floors patterned in Traitel Terrazzo, and the entrance walls are covered with large slabs of Greek Verde Antico. Bronze is employed for the frames of the show windows, elevator doors, grilles, mail box and chutes, stair railings, mouldings at the cornice line and at intersections of corners, and for the panelled grilles on ceilings which are of ornamental plaster. The typical corridors . . . are wainscoted to a height of 7 feet 2 inches with Vermont Colonial Marble, and have a base of Vermont Cipilon Marble. . . . Doors, transoms and trim are of mahogany.

333 North Michigan Avenue, the fourth and last of the major improvements surrounding the new bridge, was, according to its architects, destined "to embody the most modern ideas in office planning." The *Chicago Tribune* real estate section for May 1, 1927 reported that:

> Negotiations are under way with several large nationally known corporations to lease space, and possibly name the building for one of them.

Apparently, however, the name 333 came spontaneously and was never changed. The

architects themselves were part of the ownership syndicate involved in financing the building and were to occupy several floors when it was completed. Originally too the Women's Athletic Club was to have taken considerable space but eventually opted to build their own facility on North Michigan Avenue. However, the Tavern Club, a social organization of men from the arts, sciences, and business world, has been a tenant since the building opened, occupying the 25th and 26th floors and adjoining roof terraces.

The 333 North Michigan Avenue Building enjoys an unchallenged place in Chicago's architectural history. In concert with the three other 1920s buildings, it bounds the Michigan Avenue Bridge and defines one of Chicago's finest urban spaces. On its own, it is a matchless Art Deco design by one of the city's most eminent architectural firms. But 333 North Michigan Avenue also has a place in the city's future. It is the building from which New York architect William Pedersen of Kohn Pedersen Fox took his cue in designing the building currently under construction at 900 North Michigan Avenue (future home of Bloomingdale's department store). Rather than design in isolation, Pedersen looked at all the shapes, color, textures, heights, and bulks along Michigan Avenue from the bridge to One Magnificent Mile and determined that his design at the north end would complement 333 at the south end. In his May 6, 1986 *Chicago Sun-Times* article, journalist M. W. Newman explains:

> Pedersen has a knowing eye, and he chose 333 North Michigan, at the other end of the avenue, as a complement. It's a slender, limestone-clad aristocrat of the Art Moderne 1920s, with a marble base and towering setbacks at its peak. Seen from the north, 333 almost seems to stand by itself, thanks to a turn in the boulevard. Actually, it fits in tightly while defining the avenue like a classical column set in space.

Pedersen wisely chose a building that makes as elegant a statement today as it did more than fifty years ago when it first graced North Michigan Avenue.

OPPOSITE:

A photograph from 1928 shows the 333 North Michigan Avenue Building just after completion.

(Chicago Architectural Photographing Company)

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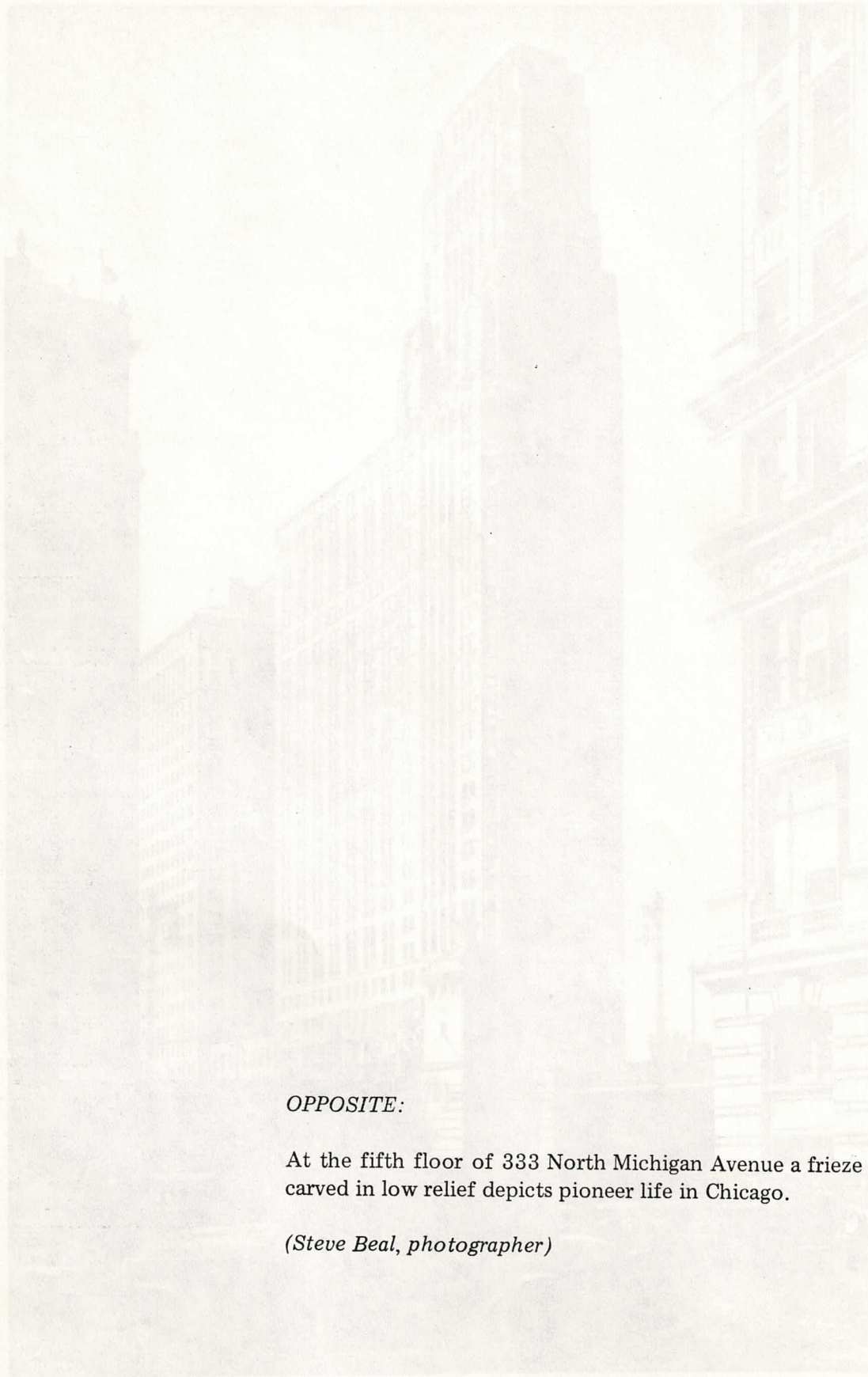

OPPOSITE:

At the fifth floor of 333 North Michigan Avenue a frieze carved in low relief depicts pioneer life in Chicago.

(Steve Beal, photographer)

OPPOSITE:

333 North Michigan Avenue is a thin slab-like structure whose northern end is treated as a tower that is visible along Michigan Avenue as far north as Oak Street.

(Steve Beal, photographer)

FLY
DELTA
JETS
IAMI
TLANTA
OUSTON

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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Room 516
320 North Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312)744-3200